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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Letter dated 31 May 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith the summary of a retreat on strengthening the General Assembly, which brought together a group of permanent representatives to the United Nations on 19 July 2016 at the Union Club in New York (see annex). The meeting was organized by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, in close cooperation with the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management of the Secretariat.

The retreat was attended by the President of the General Assembly at its seventieth session, Mogens Lykketoft, the President-elect of the General Assembly at its seventy-first session, Peter Thomson, and elected members of the General Committee of the seventy-first session, as well as the Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly during the seventieth session.

Participants in the retreat discussed the role and the status of the General Assembly and efforts to revitalize its work and working methods, with the objective of defining elements for a stronger Assembly.

Specifically, participants considered tangible measures that could be taken towards that objective, which, they agreed, could serve as useful contributions to the ongoing discussions on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Furthermore, the retreat provided an opportunity for incoming members of the General Committee to familiarize themselves with the working methods of the General Assembly and to benefit from lessons learned and best practices.

The report was prepared under the Chatham House Rule.

I should be grateful if you would circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 121.

(*Signed*) Kai **Sauer**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations

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Annex to the letter dated 31 May 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Towards a stronger General Assembly: high-level retreat, 19 July 2016

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

On 19 July 2016, the Permanent Mission of Finland, for the sixth year in a row, organized a retreat entitled "Towards a stronger General Assembly", held at the Union Club in New York, with the aim of contributing to the ongoing process of the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly. The high-level retreat began with welcoming remarks by the Permanent Representative of Finland, Kai Sauer, and the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, Catherine Pollard, who delivered a keynote address on behalf of the Secretary-General. Remarks were made by the President of the General Assembly at its seventieth session, Mogens Lykketoft, and the President-elect of the General Assembly at its seventy-first session, Peter Thompson, followed by the holding of one thematic segment in the morning and two thematic segments in the afternoon.

In the morning, the Under-Secretary-General gave a presentation on the support provided by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to the Assembly and to its President, which included a briefing on the programme of work for the forthcoming session and some recent trends in the working methods and practices of the General Assembly.

In the afternoon, under the heading "Reflections on the General Assembly revitalization process", the Permanent Representative of Croatia, Vladimir Drobnjak, and the Permanent Representative of Namibia, Wilfried Emvula, Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly during the seventieth session, provided an update on the wider debate on the revitalization of the work of the Assembly and shared insights and lessons learned on the discussions and recent deliberations of the Working Group. That was followed by reflections by the Permanent Representative of Luxembourg, Sylvie Lucas, who chaired the intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform during the seventieth session.

Each presentation was followed by a lively exchange of views. Concluding remarks were made by the Permanent Representative of Finland at the end of the high-level retreat. To stimulate the discussions, the participants had before them a concept note and the annotated preliminary list of items for the seventy-first session.

Opening remarks

In his opening remarks, the Permanent Representative of Finland welcomed participants by highlighting the achievements made during the seventieth session, including in particular the selection process of the ninth Secretary-General. He noted the important role that the President of the General Assembly had played in operationalizing and moving the process forward and recognized his determination in setting new standards of transparency in the work of the Office of the President. The President-elect of the seventy-first session, meanwhile, would be presiding over work with a declared priority focus on advancing the implementation of the

Sustainable Development Goals. The retreat, by allowing for the sharing of experiences and ideas, would serve to facilitate a smooth transition from one presidency to the next, thereby benefiting the work of the General Assembly as a whole.

The Under-Secretary-General delivered remarks by the Secretary-General, in which he recognized the important relationship that he had with the General Assembly and its President and expressed particular gratitude to the President of the seventieth session for the productive relationship that they had enjoyed. The Secretary-General noted the important work to come during the seventy-first session and welcomed the intention of the President-elect to give priority to making progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Having sought to make the most of the Assembly's uniquely legitimate and universal role and function within the United Nations, the Secretary-General identified the following two points for potential improvement: (a) the size of the agenda, where greater rigour seemed advisable lest Member States and the Secretariat alike end up spread too thin; and (b) striking the right balance between the policy-setting prerogatives of Member States and the Secretary-General's need for flexibility in exercising his responsibility as chief administrative officer. The Secretary-General welcomed the steps that had been taken to open up the process of selecting his successor, in line with Assembly resolution 69/321, which he noted built on the moves towards transparency witnessed during the months leading up to his own assumption of office a decade earlier.

Reflections on the seventieth session of the General Assembly

The President of the seventieth session welcomed the opportunity for an exchange of experiences with his successor and briefed the participants on the major outcomes achieved during the session, beginning with the historic adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015. One of his decisions had been to limit the number of high-level thematic debates organized at the President's initiative to a total of three to alleviate the workload of Member States, which had been strongly welcomed, even as his Office had experienced an increase in requests from individual delegations to convene meetings dedicated to issues of particular importance to them.

One lesson learned was that it was difficult to reconcile high-level participation with the stated desire to make such debates more interactive. At the same time, the President expressed satisfaction with the inclusive nature of the three high-level thematic debates that he had convened, which had featured participation by civil society and representatives of the private sector. The need to open up to the outside world was of urgent importance and the selection process of the ninth Secretary-General was a good example of efforts in that regard. To that end, he had organized a global town hall meeting, in cooperation with a global broadcaster, providing all the candidates with an opportunity for public debate in the General Assembly Hall, which, he hoped, would also have a real influence on the deliberations in the Security Council. It was important to be credible as an Organization vis-à-vis the outside world and, in that connection, the recent experiences in the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, for example, were to be considered, at the very least, problematic.

Turning to the administration of the Office, the President acknowledged that he had been lucky because Denmark had known of its candidature well in advance, which had given him sufficient time to prepare. His had been the largest Office of any President, with 35 staff members, which had been possible only through secondments from the wider membership. That, he noted, was necessary in the light of the increasing demands placed on the President. He strongly emphasized the

crucial importance of, and his unswerving commitment to, transparency and, in that regard, he welcomed the discussions in the Ad Hoc Working Group on an oath of office and a code of ethics for the President of the General Assembly.

Discussion

In the subsequent discussion, it was noted that the question of the modalities of civil society participation threatened to hold up important work in the General Assembly and the question was raised as to the possibility of settling the issue through an agreement among the membership on a standard format that could be applied across the board. Another point raised was the fact that the mandate of the President was not clearly defined, other than the responsibilities set out in the Assembly's rules of procedure. The current role clearly exceeded those provisions, as evidenced by the number of facilitators appointed. The Charter of the United Nations also did not elaborate on the role of the President of the General Assembly. One participant therefore asked whether the time had come for the Assembly to define the functions of the role and suggested that the Ad Hoc Working Group could carry out that task. It was noted that any such effort would need to be based on a detailed analysis of mandates, applicable rules and practice.

Another element that was identified as potentially holding back the Assembly's efficiency was a trust deficit among political groupings. Participants also raised the issue of the way in which the high-level thematic debates were organized and whether improvements could be made to ensure that greater value was derived from the efforts that went into their preparations.

Looking ahead to the seventy-first session of the General Assembly

The President-elect of the seventy-first session reflected upon the role of the President by noting the organic development of the Office, which had been shaped by practice and necessity, and comparing the Assembly's function to that of a board of 193 members overseeing the work of the Organization. Continuity of information from one President to the next was important to ensure the smooth functioning of the Assembly's work. He intended to continue the good practice of holding monthly luncheons with the Secretary-General. Recognizing the great work of the Ad Hoc Working Group, the President-elect stressed his commitment to the principles of transparency and accountability and strongly emphasized that any contributions to his presidency would be placed exclusively in the trust fund established in support of the Office. Speaking of ethics, he also suggested looking into the possibility of limiting spending when it came to the election campaigns of Member States in the Assembly, which he proposed as a potential topic for consideration by the Ad Hoc Working Group during the seventy-first session. From a substantive perspective, the main priority of his presidency would be advancing progress in the implementation of each of the Sustainable Development Goals and that would be duly reflected in the composition of his Office, which would feature a dedicated implementation team. Other issues that could be looked into further were streamlining the Assembly's agenda, making better use of the General Committee and thinking creatively about how to make better use of the thematic debates in the Assembly. He also concurred with the observations made on civil society participation in the Organization's work, which ought to be addressed.

Discussion

In the ensuing question-and-answer segment, the role of the President was once again discussed, as was the tangible benefit of convening high-level thematic debates. As to the latter, the question was raised as to how the agenda was determined for the debates. It was noted that it was difficult for smaller delegations

to follow the debates effectively owing to the large number of them that had been convened in recent years. At the same time, it was recognized that a considerable proportion of the debates were initiated by Member States themselves, including through resolutions adopted in the Main Committees. The suggestion was made that the General Committee should meet after the main part of each session, in January every year, to review the programme of work for the resumed part of the session, based on a briefing to be provided by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

Role of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in supporting the General Assembly and its President

The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management welcomed the excellent opportunity to exchange views between the outgoing and incoming Presidents, as well as between Member States and the Secretariat, on how best to improve the Assembly's working methods. She gave a presentation that focused on the programme of work for the seventy-first session, recent trends in the Assembly's working methods and the services provided by the Department to Member States and the President. Recalling the primary function of the General Committee to consider the draft agenda and make recommendations concerning the inclusion or rejection of each item, and to assist the President in the general conduct of the Assembly's work, she drew attention to the memorandum prepared by the Secretary-General containing the draft agenda and recommendations on the organization of work, which would be before the General Committee at its first meeting.

Following her remarks on the high-level segment encompassing the general debate and the high-level meetings mandated by the Assembly, she gave a briefing on the tentative programme for the main and resumed parts of the session. With regard to recent trends in the Assembly's work, she highlighted the noticeable increase in the number and duration of high-level thematic debates, which had initially been intended to facilitate a more interactive exchange in an informal setting, but which had tended to consist of the delivery of prepared written statements followed by panel presentations, too often leaving little time for discussions by Member States. Moreover, there had been a general increase in the number of mandates addressed to the Presidents of the Assembly on a routine basis, such as the finalization of modalities for future high-level meetings, which presented a real addition to their workload.

It was the Secretariat's mission to facilitate the effective conduct of the deliberations and follow-up actions of the Assembly and to ensure the provision of high-quality conference-servicing support to all intergovernmental and expert bodies. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management provided a wide range of support to the Office of the President on a daily basis throughout the year. The Department also served as the focal point for the Office within the Secretariat and acted as a repository of institutional memory, best practices and past precedents, similar to the role played by the Security Council Affairs Division of the Department of Political Affairs in relation to the work of the Security Council and its President.

For the first time, in 2016, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management would organize an induction programme for the incoming President. Aside from specific support to the President, the Department also provided a range of conference management and conference services throughout the year, which included preparing parliamentary documentation, handling the speakers list, receiving and processing draft resolutions, receiving candidacies for elections, administering the voting and balloting in the Assembly, booking rooms, providing

meeting management services, providing interpretation and translation services and issuing documentation.

Discussion

In the ensuing question-and-answer segment, participants considered innovative ways to further strengthen the Assembly's work. One speaker asked about the possibility of enforcing time limits more strictly, including by cutting off the speaker's microphone. Participants once again raised the issue of the need to streamline the Assembly's agenda, which was considered to be too unwieldy, in order to allow the Assembly to better focus on matters of urgency. Other issues included the perceived difficulty in booking rooms for intergovernmental meetings, the possibility of introducing e-balloting for elections and the process of advising Member States on programme budget implications.

Reflections on the General Assembly revitalization process

The Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group both gave briefings on the status of work during the seventieth session and identified recent trends in positions among Member States on the various thematic clusters on which the Working Group traditionally focused. The Permanent Representative of Croatia recognized the value of the revitalization process simply for the educational value for the membership with regard to the working methods of the Assembly. Noting the success of the landmark resolution adopted at the previous session, resolution 69/321, he identified two reasons why its adoption had been possible, namely, because the timing had coincided with the impending start of the selection process for the new Secretary-General and because the agreed provisions did not require amendments to the Charter. The President of the seventieth session had made excellent use of the mandate given to him under that resolution and had been aided by the fact that it had been adopted by consensus. Meanwhile, the thematic cluster on the selection and appointment process of the Secretary-General had been exhausted and was unlikely to yield further significant results in the seventieth session, as the outstanding demands, such as multiple candidates and a single-term limit, did not enjoy universal support among the membership. There was, however, increased attention to the issue of appointment of senior officials, which would likely continue to be relevant in the negotiations on the draft resolution under consideration.

In addition to other measures aimed at strengthening the Office of the President, it was expected that an oath of office and a code of ethics for future Presidents would be adopted. Streamlining the agenda, on the other hand, was important but would be difficult to achieve. The major lesson learned from resolution 69/321 was that any provisions needed to be backed up by granting the President the authority to implement them. Looking forward, areas of potential interest for the Ad Hoc Working Group at the seventy-first session could include the rationalization of the Assembly's agenda, the drafting of a code on election campaigns in the Assembly and the elaboration of a definition of the role and functions of the President. In that connection, the Permanent Representative of Namibia added that engagement with the various groups had been an important factor in arriving at a consensus on resolution 69/321. During the current session, the focus had shifted towards identifying measures to strengthen the accountability and transparency of the Office of the President of the General Assembly — with broad support for the introduction of an oath of office — even as specific meetings had been dedicated to discussing issues related to the selection and appointment process of the Secretary-General, in particular the issue of imposing a single-term limit. It was important that the Working Group would continue to be guided by the principle of consensus.

Discussion

In the ensuing question-and-answer segment, participants congratulated the Co-Chairs for the productive work undertaken during both the seventieth and the sixty-ninth sessions. From a substantive standpoint, the issues raised included the streamlining of the Assembly's agenda, the role of the General Committee, the selection and appointment process of the Secretary-General, the working methods of the Fifth Committee and the perceived need to strengthen the Office of the President. In that context, the participants were informed that about 25 per cent of the staff members in the Office of the President from the seventieth session would remain in their posts for the seventy-first session and that, in turn, it was the intention to have staff from the seventy-first session continue to work in the Office for the subsequent session. That, it was suggested, would help to maintain the institutional memory required for the effective exercise by the President of his responsibilities. It was further argued that the Office should be endowed with sufficient budgetary resources to be able to function independently. As to the General Committee, it was concluded that it had unused potential and that the membership was forgoing a vehicle that could be used to better organize the work of the Assembly. Concerning the Assembly's agenda, it was noted that the President had an important leadership role to play by identifying areas of overlap in the Assembly's work. While the Secretariat could facilitate such a process, it needed to be driven strictly by Member States.

Practices and experiences of the intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform

The Chair of the intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform provided an overview of the negotiations process during the seventieth session. Having extensively consulted Member States at the beginning of the session, she had set out to build a process for the negotiations that would be based on the positions and proposals of Member States rather than on procedural matters. She had convened a series of informal plenary meetings, using the text and its annex circulated by the President of the sixty-ninth session of the General Assembly as a basis for discussions, starting with the less problematic issues, while bearing in mind their interlinkages. She noted that finding points of convergence and building on them would be the only way forward in the negotiations and that, with strong support from the President of the seventieth session, such had been her aim throughout the seventieth session.

The discussions on the relationship between the Council and the Assembly and on the size of an enlarged Council and its working methods, in particular, had yielded a high level of convergence and, in her capacity as Chair, she reflected that a paper that had been produced on the elements of convergence on two of the five key issues could help to inform future work in relation to the negotiations. Those elements had been further refined in two meetings with all Member States and the paper had subsequently been recirculated. In terms of lessons learned, it was beneficial to focus on substance over procedure and to facilitate serious engagement between the various groups and other interested Member States, while encouraging introspection and avoidance of repetitive statements. Some groups, for example, had made suggestions to merge language, but those efforts needed to be reciprocated. Looking to the next session, the paper could be a way forward as it reflected broad areas of convergence. At the same time, much more work needed to be done, which would be contingent on the political will of Member States to engage in sincere negotiations.

Discussion

In the subsequent exchange of views, various issues were raised. One participant enquired as to the potential political ramifications of the decision by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to leave the European Union in the future negotiations on Security Council reform and asked whether consideration had been given to who would chair the intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform during the seventy-first session. Another participant spoke on possible ways of moving forward on the reform, whereas yet another suggested that the intergovernmental negotiations presented a procedural step backwards from the Open-ended Working Group, which had preceded the current format, as there were no longer official records of the meetings. The view was expressed, however, that there would be reluctance among the wider membership to summaries being produced of the negotiations at the current stage, even though there was convergence in relation to two of the five key issues.

Closing remarks

At the end of the retreat, the Permanent Representative of Finland thanked all the participants for their active participation and concluded that the event had served its purpose by functioning as a clearing house on the themes under discussion and other items raised during the interactive discussions. That, he hoped, would facilitate the work of the President of the seventy-first session. He welcomed the frank presentation by the President of the seventieth session and noted his legacy in the area of strengthening transparency, which would surely help in the transition from one session to the next. Lastly, he expressed appreciation to the Under-Secretary-General, whose participation had provided substantive insight and given a stimulus to the deliberations.